

CONTRIBUTED PAPER

Cat owners' perceptions of domestic cats and implications for European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) restoration

Thomas R. Dando^{1,2}  | Robbie A. McDonald¹  | Richard P. Young²  |
Stephen P. Carter³  | Sarah L. Crowley⁴ 

¹Environment and Sustainability Institute,
University of Exeter, Penryn Campus,
Cornwall, UK

²Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust,
Trinity, Jersey

³Vincent Wildlife Trust,
Herefordshire, UK

⁴Centre for Geography and
Environmental Science, University of
Exeter, Penryn Campus, Cornwall, UK

Correspondence

Thomas R. Dando, Environment and
Sustainability Institute, University of
Exeter, Penryn Campus, Penryn, TR10
9EZ Cornwall, UK.
Email: thomas.dando@durrell.org

Funding information

Vincent Wildlife Trust; Durrell Wildlife
Conservation Trust; University of Exeter

Abstract

Cat owners are key stakeholders and influencers in discourses around cat management. While research has examined cat impacts on wildlife, there is limited understanding of cat owners' perspectives on management responsibilities, particularly in regions where European wildcats *Felis silvestris* are threatened by hybridization with domestic cats *Felis catus*. To address this gap, we conducted semi-structured interviews with rural-living cat owners within two regions of the UK where wildcat reintroductions are being contemplated. Interviewees were asked about their perspectives on the impacts of, and responsibility for, owned and unowned domestic cats and wildcats. We also explored cat owners' present knowledge of wildcats. We find a lack of consensus over who is, or should be, responsible for unowned cats to be a significant barrier to effective cat management. This is highlighted by the shifting perceptions of unowned cats between domesticated and wild. Moreover, the lack of cognizance of wildcats among cat owners is a primary challenge facing wildcat restoration and unowned cat management. We propose collaboration among a broad group of stakeholders to develop management strategies for unowned cats in the context of wildcat restoration and suggest a focus on cat welfare. The challenges of domestic cat management provide insight useful to wildlife restoration projects where there is a need to engage and highlight co-benefits with stakeholders who are interested but not necessarily engaged in conservation issues or practices.

KEYWORDS

cat management, domestic cat, European wildcat, human dimensions, hybridization, reintroduction, semi-structured interviews, social feasibility, species restoration, stakeholder engagement

1 | INTRODUCTION

Domestic cats can threaten biodiversity through wildlife predation (Doherty et al., 2016; Loss & Marra, 2017),

compete with wild carnivores (Medina et al., 2014), and act as both reservoirs and carriers of infectious pathogens (Gerhold & Jessup, 2013; Taetzsch et al., 2018). Domestic cats also present a challenge to the conservation of the

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Conservation Science and Practice* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Society for Conservation Biology.

European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*), with which they readily interbreed, leading to the introgression of domestic cat DNA into wildcat genomes (Tiesmeyer et al., 2020). Combined with the profound relationship between domestic cats and people (Crowley et al., 2020a), the management of domestic cats is a keenly debated and often divisive topic (Calver et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2019; Hostetler et al., 2020; Read et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2019). Cat owners are key stakeholders in these debates, as their practices and perspectives directly influence cats' impacts and wider discourses on cat management (Cecchetti, Crowley, McDonald, 2021a; Bassett et al., 2020; Cecchetti, Crowley, Goodwin, & McDonald, 2021b; Deak et al., 2019; Loyd & Hernandez, 2012). Understanding cat owners' perspectives on the impact and management of cats is therefore helpful for effective deliberation, decision-making, and conservation practice.

Management of domestic cats and mitigation of their impacts are complicated by their variable relationships with humans. Domestic cats exist on a spectrum of behavioral autonomy and legal regulation: they can be owned, semi-owned, or unowned depending on the level of human responsibility and control over their movement, feeding, and reproduction (Crowley et al., 2020b). Cats living as owned companion animals experience more control than unowned (feral) animals, though diversity and overlap exist among these types. For example, owned indoor-outdoor cats are fed by people while their movement and reproduction are often curtailed. Similarly, while having no controls placed on their movements, free-ranging cats are often treated as "working animals," including on farms, where they are fed and sometimes neutered (Crowley et al., 2020b).

The ownership status of cats can be dynamic, with owned cats having the potential to stray and become feral, while unowned cats can return to greater human control through rehoming or being kept as working animals on farms (Bradshaw et al., 1999; Crowley et al., 2020b). The dual processes of "feralization" and "domestication" (here indicating a within-lifetime transition into closer relationships with humans) are complex (Bonacic et al., 2019; Henriksen et al., 2018) and affect both the impacts of, and assumed legal and ethical responsibilities for, domestic cats. People's perspectives as to what constitutes different cat "types" are similarly complex, and can change depending on the space the animal inhabits and its behaviors (Van Patter & Hovorka, 2018). Moreover, people's perspectives of cats can vary among cat generations due to hybridization (e.g., European wildcat-domestic cat hybrids) and human interventions, including cat ownership practices, cat management activities, and conservation engagement

(Fredriksen, 2016; Gering et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

The processes of feralization, domestication, and hybridization place cats in a liminal biopolitical space between nature/culture and domesticated/wild (Fredriksen, 2016; Holm, 2020; Palmer & Thomas, 2023; Van Patter & Hovorka, 2018). The distinctions made by people between an owned cat and an unowned cat, or a hybrid cat and a wildcat, have material consequences; each cat's typology, and those making a judgment of this, subject it to shifting combinations of perceptions, social constructs, legal protections and decision-making processes (Fredriksen, 2016; Holm, 2020; Srinivasan, 2013; Trouwborst et al., 2020; Trouwborst & Somsen, 2020). Furthermore, definitions of welfare, ethics, and status will change depending on the human actor, place, time, and circumstance, meaning all domestic cats could be seen as companions or pests (Crowley et al., 2020a), and subjected to care or persecution, lethal or non-lethal control, or all of the above, at some stage, irrespective of the cat's individual actions (Holm, 2020; Srinivasan, 2013).

The spread of domestic cat genes by their hybridization with wildcat species is a major conservation concern and a significant management challenge. European wildcats, present throughout much of Europe, are locally threatened by hybridization and pathogen transmission from domestic cats, as well as other anthropogenic factors (Bastianelli et al., 2021; Daniels et al., 1999; Mattucci et al., 2016; Ruiz-Villar et al., 2023; Tiesmeyer et al., 2020; Unterköfler et al., 2022). Hybridization is most prominent in Scotland, where the last remaining wild wildcat population in Britain has been described as "functionally extinct" as a consequence (Breitenmoser et al., 2019). To counter this situation, a wildcat reinforcement project is being undertaken in Scotland. In addition, reintroductions have been proposed in Wales and England. The importance of managing domestic cats (including owned, semi-owned and unowned animals) and engaging with cat owners have been identified as fundamental to the long-term success of wildcat conservation strategies in Britain (Campbell et al., 2023; Littlewood et al., 2014). While some engagement has been undertaken as part of conservation initiatives within wildcat "priority areas" of Scotland (Bacon, 2017; Littlewood et al., 2014), this is not the case in England and Wales, where wildcats have been absent for ~150 years (Langley & Yalden, 1977). The consideration of human dimensions in reintroduction projects is associated with improved outcomes, including higher probability of survival and reproduction (Serota et al., 2023) as well as reduced social conflict (Dando et al., 2023). The inclusion of key stakeholders, such as cat owners, in a wildcat reintroduction is therefore a critical step in the process.

The reintroduction of wildcats to Britain presents an opportunity to restore a native species and enhance trophic complexity. It therefore makes a compelling conservation and ecological proposition. However, the presence of widely accepted and familiar feral and domestic cats can cause conflation in both function and appearance with wildcats, thereby complicating the justification for such resource-intensive conservation (Fredriksen, 2016; Wrigley, 2020). This complexity is amplified by the paradox of hybrid cats—considered a threat to reintroduction while being functionally similar to wildcats (Fredriksen, 2016). Many studies argue the importance of preserving the genetic integrity of wildcats (Daniels & Corbett, 2003; Nussberger et al., 2023; Tiesmeyer et al., 2020). Others evidence the divergent ecological functions between different cat “types,” usually centered around population structures (Bradshaw, 2016), response to humans (Ferreira et al., 2011; Klar et al., 2008) and diet (Biró et al., 2005). Some also discuss the value of “native” wildcats versus “non-native” feral and domestic cats (Fredriksen, 2016). However, the extent to which these discussions resonate beyond scientific circles and influence key stakeholders, including cat owners, remains unexplored.

To explore cat management and owners' perspectives, we conducted semi-structured interviews with cat owners in rural areas of England and Wales. The interviews considered variations among owners' perceptions of impact and responsibility concerning cat life history and owners' current awareness of European wildcats and their attitudes to a proposed reintroduction.

2 | METHODS

We conducted semi-structured interviews with cat owners. We aimed to examine how owners' perceptions of impacts and responsibility for cats vary according to a broad classification of cat “types.” To enable discussion, we adopted a simple classification of domestic cats as owned or unowned, based on Crowley et al. (2020b) in relation to provisioning, reproduction, and movement. We also used wildcat as a further type, referring to the European wildcat. Interviewees were informed how owned and unowned cats were defined by this study as a preface to the interview questions. While we used the term unowned cats, interviewees frequently used the synonym “feral cat”; similarly, domestic cat was used interchangeably with owned cat, and we retain these terms when participants used them. Wildcats were not defined for participants, as we were interested in determining cat owners' existing knowledge of this species.

Participants were recruited and interviewed between November 2020 and April 2021. We targeted areas under

evaluation as potential regions for wildcat reintroductions (MacPherson et al., 2019) in southwest England and southwest Wales. Recruitment occurred primarily online, by advertising through a diverse selection of “cat groups” through social media and via snowball sampling. Four main online groups were targeted: interest groups, rescue centers, welfare groups, and farm/feral cat groups. This approach to recruitment means participants were likely to be more than usually engaged with the issues discussed. Consequently, our sample is likely to be biased toward those interested in, and who feel most strongly about, cat welfare and management, rather than representative of the broader population of cat owners. Such engaged cat owners are especially important to these discussions due to their influence on and contribution to the discourse about cats and their management. We were seeking a diverse rather than representative sample, and toward the end of the recruitment period, we purposively recruited those who had rehomed unowned animals as outdoor-only cats, recognizing the potential significance of this group in terms of these animals' ecological interactions. Additional participants were recruited via word of mouth. Cat owners in rural areas are exposed to the interface between owned and unowned cats and would be for wildcats in the event of a reintroduction; consequently, we focused recruitment on rural areas as defined by Rural Urban Classification for England and Wales (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs et al., 2016).

We interviewed 25 people (see Table S1), of whom 23 (92%) were female. This sampling bias has been seen in similar studies of cat owners (e.g., Crowley et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2016; Wald et al., 2013). While there are more female cat owners in the United Kingdom (58%: PDSA, 2017) such a strong gender bias in response to recruitment in this study and others indicates the need for future studies to seek alternative approaches to recruitment that incentivize male cat owners to participate. Similarly, our sample contains a large skew (94%) toward owners who neuter their cats; however, this is broadly consistent with an estimated average neutering rate in the UK of 89% (PDSA, 2022).

TD conducted all interviews, following a semi-structured schedule (see Data S1, Supporting Information). Interviews were conducted using both video and telephone calls due to restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time. The study received ethical approval from the University of Exeter's CLES Penryn Ethics Committee (eCORN003107).

Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo (v12). A systematic thematic analysis was conducted in three distinct

stages by a single coder (TD) to identify the most salient themes (prioritizing significance and relevance over frequency of occurrence) that emerged regarding each cat classification. In the first stage, transcripts underwent initial descriptive coding where responses were systematically grouped according to cat classification categories. During the second stage, these grouped responses were analyzed and coded into major thematic areas. While the first stage allowed us to get an idea of likely themes, this process was largely inductive, with three themes produced: (a) impacts of each cat type; (b) responsibility for each cat type; (c) management of each cat type. A final theme: (d) wildcats and their reintroduction, was deductive as it was viewed as a key focus of the research. In the final stage, an iterative process of inductive sub-coding was employed within each major theme to identify and consolidate related perspectives, allowing for the emergence of more nuanced patterns and relationships between different viewpoints. To ensure analytical rigor, constant comparison was used throughout the coding process, with new data being continuously compared to existing codes and themes to refine the analytical framework. Numeric coded identifiers are used here to protect participants' identities.

3 | RESULTS

This section is organized in relation to four key topics from our interviews. All highlight the importance of cat type in determining participants' perceptions and attitudes toward cat behaviors, impacts, and appropriate management. First, we consider participants' perspectives of the impacts of owned cats, unowned cats, and wildcats upon wildlife and other cats. Second, we identify how participants attribute management responsibility to different people and/or organizations depending on cat type. Finally, we focus on cat owners' views on the prospect of a wildcat reintroduction to their area.

3.1 | Impacts and interactions

3.1.1 | Impact on wildlife

The impact of unowned cats and wildcats on wildlife, specifically arising from predation, generated mixed views among participants (Figure 1). A key point of divergence centered on whether cats targeted "wanted" wildlife like birds, versus "unwanted" pests such as rabbits and rodents. For example, a common theme when discussing unowned cats and wildcats, was their beneficial role in pest control, with Participant 5 noting, "These guys are

mainly catching rabbits ... we need to keep them down; they [rabbits] do a lot of bad down at the farm." However, attitudes shifted when discussing owned cats. Reflecting a common sentiment Participant 18 explained, "I'm not concerned about the mice he's catching, but the birds," reflecting a broader concern about owned cats' impact on valued bird populations. The perception of beneficial predation was primarily associated with rodent control, particularly among those keeping outdoor-only cats as described by Participant 17, "the main reason for having outdoor cats is because we have had rats and mice problems in the past."

While participants acknowledged unowned cats' threat to wildlife, their responses often revealed a complex emotional tension. This was evident in Participant 14's reflection: "I just feel bad for them, but I know it's bad for the environment because they kill lots." The perception of owned cats' impact on sensitive wildlife, however, tended to be more straightforwardly critical. When discussing wildcats, attitudes were more positive, Participant 2 articulated a widely shared ecological perspective: "the ecology of that place is geared to that animal being there," highlighting the perceived legitimacy of native species within British ecosystems.

Some participants challenged prevailing concerns about feline predation. Taking a skeptical stance, Participant 9 dismissed assumptions about domestic cats' impact: "It's a complete assumption and it is overstated." The rural context also influenced these perspectives, with one participant suggesting that the vastness of rural spaces would dilute any negative impact from unowned cats. Regarding wildcats, several participants advocated for a more evidence-based approach toward their impact on wildlife, emphasizing the need for research before proceeding with rural reintroduction efforts.

3.1.2 | Impact on other cats

When discussing inter-cat conflict, participants drew distinct characterizations between different cat types (Figure 1). While owned cats were typically portrayed as vulnerable, unowned cats and wildcats were cast as aggressors. Illustrating this dichotomy, Participant 6 drew a clear contrast: "domestic cats tend to be a lot calmer ... they tend to be a nicer character than some of the feral cats, who tend to be quite dominating." The prospect of wildcat interactions sparked divergent views. Though some feared for their pets' safety, others, like Participant 8, dismissed these concerns: "people say that it might cause an issue to domestic cats. I don't think it would unless you've got a very stupid domestic cat."

The discussion of conflict extended beyond simple aggression to broader ecological and health concerns.

FIGURE 1 Schematic showing the range of cat owners' perspectives on the impact of owned and unowned domestic cats and wildcats in relation to their perceived impact on wildlife and other cats.



Territorial behavior among owned cats emerged as a potential source of tension with both domestic and unowned animals. Pathogen transmission from unowned cats also emerged as a significant worry. The issue of hybridization between cat types was rarely discussed. However, some participants, including Participant 8, suggested an unexpected benefit: “If you’ve got the risk of your cat breeding with a wildcat, it might pressure people into thinking, well I might neuter him.” This perspective reframed the hybridization risk as a potential catalyst for responsible pet ownership.

3.2 | Responsibility

Responsibility for the management, behavior, and impacts of owned cats was split by the respondents into

four parties (Table 1), cat owners, cats, society, and cat charities:

Cat owners identified themselves as being responsible for all aspects of an owned cat's health, and sometimes any impact they might have inside and outside of the home, for example, Participant 5 stated “I am responsible for their health, their wellbeing. And then also I want to make sure they're not impacting on wildlife, like some of the birds, particularly.”

Cats were determined by a minority of participants to be responsible for their own actions outside of the home, such as predation and social disturbance. It was commonly stated that they (owners) cannot control what their cat does. Participant 8 summed up this perspective “When they're outside you can't really stop what they're doing ... it's kind of a wild animal.”

TABLE 1 Frequencies of stakeholders identified as responsible for the care and management of cats, categorized by cat type (owned, unowned, and wildcat). Multiple stakeholders could be identified per participant.

Stakeholder	Domestic cats		
	Owned	Unowned	Wildcats
Cat charities	1	6	0
Cat owners	13	2	3
Cats	11	0	0
Coalition of stakeholders	0	2	0
Government authorities	0	4	0
Landowners/farmers	0	3	0
Society	2	6	0
Wildlife organizations	0	2	21
Don't know	0	4	3

Society (meaning everyone) was considered responsible for being aware of and reporting owned animals or cats of unknown status they encounter if they are in bad health, while *cat charities* were deemed responsible for ensuring owners are “educated” and able to adequately care for their cats.

Responsibility for unowned cats was more complex (Table 1): cat charities, government and local authorities, farmers and landowners, society, cat owners, wildlife conservation organizations, and a coalition of some or all of these parties were put forward by participants.

Most commonly, *cat charities* were primarily deemed responsible for health, breeding, and Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Release (TNVR) programs and considered a trusted group as described by Participant 14 “I think we should help them. I donate to cat charities every month and they do lots of trapping and provide health checks, neutering that sort of thing, so they would be my first port of call.”

Government and local authorities were identified as being responsible for identification and regulation of unowned cats, the former referring to having a more robust and regulated microchipping system to improve accountability, as explained by Participant 8: “a government programme would be quite useful to have if they were to introduce (wild)cats, if you had to have microchips it would be a lot easier to identify a feral cat.”

Farmers and landowners were deemed responsible for maintaining health and limiting breeding of unowned cats on their land. Participant 23 put forward a commonly held position around the benefits farmers derived from unowned cats and the responsibility that should come with it “If an animal is of use to you as a farmer, if you're prepared to take those services and keeping your rodent population down or whatever. I think on a human level you've got some responsibility to them.”

Society, as with owned cats, was put forward by several participants as having some responsibility for unowned cats, with Participant 25 suggesting vigilance in reporting to be a clear role: “I think they are society's responsibility really, nobody owns them but they are suffering and if there are feral cats in a community, the people living there should be trying to do something about it, rehome or whatever, but so many people just don't care.”

A *coalition of stakeholders*, including landowners, charities, and local government, was also suggested as being needed to reduce numbers and provide better welfare outcomes for unowned cats. Finally, *cat owners* and *wildlife organizations* were each mentioned. Cat owners might reduce the impact of owned cats becoming feral by microchipping and neutering them, while it was suggested that wildlife organizations could intervene around the issue of unowned cat predation on wildlife, although no detail was given as to how.

For wildcats, responsibility was predominantly attributed to the *wildlife organizations* interested in reintroducing them (Table 1), referring to research on food availability and mitigating risks to cats and other rural industries as summarized by Participant 25: “I would have thought it would be up to the wildlife groups releasing them to make sure their needs were met and whatever research was needed to decide that was done beforehand.”

Wildlife organizations were predominantly viewed as responsible for wildcat reintroduction. Participant 25 captured this: “I would have thought it would be up to the wildlife groups releasing them to make sure their needs were met and whatever research was needed to decide that was done beforehand.” *Cat owners* were seen as having an indirect role in managing potential conflicts and hybridization through adaptive outdoor access strategies.

3.3 | European wildcat reintroduction

Participants generally supported European wildcat reintroduction, primarily framing it as restoring a native species (Figure 2). Participant 2 captured this line of thinking: “I think if there's a wildcat reintroduction it's only putting back what should be there in the first place. And that's a different scenario to a domestic cat, which is not necessarily supposed to be in the area.”

Support stemmed from diverse motivations. Some, like Participant 13, were driven by a passion for cats: “I am a cat person, and I love cats; I would love to see them [wildcats] in this country.” Others saw ecological pragmatism, with Participant 22 viewing wildcats as natural pest controllers: “I would have thought of them as a replacement and therefore reducing the need for people to keep their own farm or feral cats.”



FIGURE 2 Summary of cat owner responses to the prospect of reintroduction of European wildcats to their area. Divided into four groups: Supportive statements, conditional support, opposition statements, and questions.

Caveats and concerns emerged alongside support. Participant 9 highlighted habitat limitations: “I suppose in Scotland there's so much wilderness, but we don't have that amount of wilderness, do we?” Some owners, while supportive, expressed location-specific reservations: “Oh my god. No, I wouldn't be very happy, maybe somewhere else, but not here.”

Critically, participants' support was tempered by significant knowledge gaps. Queries about wildcat interactions (“I don't know if wildcats interact with domestic cats or whether they just don't” [22]), diet (“I don't think a wildcat could take a deer could it?” [03]) as well as size and type (“I haven't actually heard about wildcats, I've heard about lynx, is that what you mean?” [08]). Hybridization, a key conservation concern, was rarely mentioned, suggesting limited public awareness.

A wildcat reintroduction was seen as something which could influence cat management practices. Owners anticipated adapting outdoor access and neutering behaviors. Participant 5 noted potential socioeconomic barriers to responsible cat management: “most people would be onto neutering if there is a good program or cheap enough to do it.” Conversely, Participant 17 suggested entrenched attitudes might resist change: “I think if you don't think it's important now, you're probably not going to change your mind.” (Figure 2)

4 | DISCUSSION

How different cat types lived and their proximity to people influenced owners' perceptions of cat impacts and human responsibility. We found disparities in participants' perceptions, with owned cats perceived to have more negative impacts on wildlife than other cats, while wildcats were thought to be beneficial. Unowned cats, meanwhile, were thought to have both negative and positive impacts on wildlife; however, owners accommodated the negative impacts by recognizing their need to survive. This contrasts with participants' perspectives on conflict between cats, with the perceived “wild” behaviors of unowned cats and wildcats viewed negatively and not acceptable in the context of interactions with owners' cats. This highlights a nature/culture divide in this discourse whereby owned cats are generally seen as domestic in type and bad for nature, while wildcats are seen as wild in type and good for nature. Participant expectations of unowned cats' welfare, and impact on the environment and other cats varied in alignment between that of owned cats and wildcats depending on the participant and subject. Unowned cats, therefore, exist in a liminal state in cat owners' perceptions of impact, responsibility, welfare, and consequently, management, connected to both domestic and wild environments but belonging to

neither. These diverse viewpoints present a challenge for developing agreeable management strategies, which in turn has negative consequences for wildcat restoration.

4.1 | Cat impact and responsibility

Our interviews highlight that the impacts of cats on wildlife are perceived differently by cat owners depending on cat “type.” Predation by owned cats was viewed as anthropogenic and was consequently seen as unnatural (Holm, 2020). In contrast, as an indigenous wild animal, predation by wildcats was considered “natural,” and therefore any impact was also perceived this way. Only in certain circumstances was predation by owned cats viewed as desirable, for example, when catching and killing “vermin” such as rodents (see also Crowley et al., 2019). Predation by unowned cats was thought of as useful when *in the right place*. Furthermore, predation by unowned cats that are hunting to survive was perceived as more acceptable due to the poor welfare conditions in which they were perceived to live, indicating unowned cats functioning as a “domestic wildcat.” Cat owners in this study prioritized unowned cat welfare over ecological concerns, underscoring the importance they place on domestic cat welfare regardless of ownership status. This duality has previously been identified in conversations around owned cats (Crowley et al., 2020a), but the prevalence of a similar division in discussions on unowned cats has a direct bearing on debates as to what is considered humane cat management. The apparently divided view of the wildness and the welfare of unowned cats suggests a cat ownership community in the UK that is united behind the notion that unowned cats need to be managed but divided by the welfare and ethical implications of different approaches to achieve this. This categorical ambiguity has practical implications for management, as different ethical frameworks and legal protections may apply depending on how unowned cats are classified. Similar challenges have been documented in other contexts where species status and public perception affects management options, such as with dingoes in Australia (Smith et al., 2020; van Eeden et al., 2020). Understanding this duality is crucial for developing socially acceptable management strategies that can effectively address both welfare and conservation concerns.

The large variety of views evidenced on responsibility for unowned cats reveals a fundamental governance challenge. While owned cats and wildcats fit into established frameworks of private ownership and conservation, respectively, unowned cats occupy a problematic liminal space. This issue is reflected in the two perspectives we identified in terms of responsibility for unowned cats:

one seeking top-down management through formal authorities, which broadly reflects results seen elsewhere (Gates et al., 2019), the other emphasizing bottom-up responsibility through local actors. The lack of integration between these perspectives, and particularly the absence of self-identified responsibility among cat owners, suggests a scenario where diffuse responsibility leads to ineffective action. The tendency for cat owners to externalize responsibility for unowned cats, despite their potential role in preventing ferality, suggests a failure to recognize their potential contribution to both the issues and solutions. The self-appointment of responsibility by local actors and charitable organizations (Natoli et al., 2019), while valuable, may be insufficient for addressing the scale of unowned cat management needed for effective wildcat conservation. This situation suggests that successful management of unowned cats may require new governance and decision-making frameworks that bridge the gap between formal institutions and local actors, while explicitly connecting cat owner practices to broader conservation outcomes.

4.2 | Perspectives on the European wildcat

Cat owners in our sample knew very little about wildcats. Wildcats were perceived to belong in the English and Welsh landscape, with owners valuing their rarity, and potential role in replacing unowned cats in controlling “pest” species such as rabbits. We did not, however, find the wider range of values attributed to wildcats in assessments of stakeholders in Scotland (Williams Foley, 2022). Notably, there was no reference to cultural, symbolic, or economic value. This is not surprising for a species that has been absent from our survey areas for around 150 years (Jarić et al., 2022), but indicates the need to establish a connection between cat owners and wildcats if owners are to play some role in wildcat restoration or associated management of other cats.

Wildcats were considered by some to be a threat to domestic animals, including the safety of owned cats. This led some owners to support a reintroduction in principle, but not want it to occur near them (Scott et al., 2016; von Essen & Allen, 2020). Domestic cats are rarely found in dietary analysis of wildcats, and when they are, it is likely as a result of carrion (Biró et al., 2005). While there is little evidence that pigs and sheep are killed by wildcats (Lozano et al., 2006), poultry have been recorded, albeit rarely, and less so than for domestic cats (Biró et al., 2005). Wildcats are often depicted as wild, fierce, and untameable, potentially increasing the perceived separation between owned and

unowned domestic cats and wildcats (Fredriksen, 2016; Wrigley, 2020). Acknowledgment of the genetic relationship between domestic cats and wildcats was rare. Such representations may be filling gaps in scientific knowledge or practical experience of wildcat ecology (Baker et al., 2020; Lescureux et al., 2011). The gap between wildcat representations and reality reflects a broader challenge in conservation: how cultural narratives about “wild” versus “domestic” animal’s influence management decisions and public support. The portrayal of wildcats as fundamentally different from domestic cats, in particular unowned cats, may reinforce a false dichotomy that overlooks their biological similarities and interbreeding potential. However, this presents a complex paradox for conservation messaging: while emphasizing wildcat distinctiveness risks obscuring hybridization threats, diminishing their unique identity could undermine public support for their restoration as a distinct native species fulfilling a specific ecological niche. This has practical implications for conservation strategies, as successful wildcat restoration likely requires public recognition of the genetic continuity between wild and domestic cats to ensure support for management measures that address hybridization risks, while also balancing arguments supporting the species’ unique conservation value.

Owners viewed wildlife groups as responsible for wildcat impacts after reintroduction, reflecting similar expectations documented for reintroduced Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*) (Auster et al., 2021). While long-term commitments from project initiators are crucial for success, indefinite responsibility may not be viable for wildlife groups (Dando et al., 2023). Research shows that local communities can develop strong attachments to reintroduced species over time, even becoming protective advocates who resist government interventions, as seen with beaver reintroductions (Crowley et al., 2017). Wildlife groups accepting initial responsibility for an agreed period can reduce conflict and facilitate stakeholder engagement until the species’ presence becomes normalized and community-supported management processes are established (Auster et al., 2021). This approach can be effective when combined with participatory decision-making frameworks that actively involve local stakeholders in ongoing management planning to facilitate long-term coexistence (Dando et al., 2023; König et al., 2020; Marino et al., 2024). This may be particularly effective in projects such as this, where the reintroduced species would be expected to coexist within an agriculturally dominated landscape (König et al., 2020).

A small number of participants deemed cat owners to have some responsibility for wildcat welfare, particularly concerning hybridization between domestic cats and wildcats. This is in contrast to research in wildcat areas

of Scotland which found high awareness and strong perceptions of responsibility among cat owners (Bacon, 2017). Neutering programs targeting owned and unowned cats would likely be a central point to any cat owner engagement on the issue of hybridization (Campbell et al., 2023; Kilshaw et al., 2008). However, perceptions of the extent that a wildcat reintroduction could catalyze these practices were mixed. Despite hybridization not being a prominent issue in our interviews, we did find that neutering owned and unowned cats was a management priority for our participants, suggesting that despite different motives both conservationists and cat owners support some of the same management strategies (Crowley et al., 2022).

4.3 | Limitations

Our approach to recruitment is likely to have self-selected for more than usually engaged rural cat owners on the issues presented. Thus, it seems reasonable that our sample may overrepresent concern about the impact of owned cats on wildlife and the welfare of unowned cats, compared to the general population of cat owners. This is due to these issues not always being visible to owners, meaning awareness of them depends on some level of engagement in the topic. Moreover, the low awareness of wildcats even among our engaged sample suggests that in the general cat owning population it may be even lower. Although our participants suggested that wildcats could potentially motivate more responsible cat ownership, this effect may be harder to achieve than our results suggest, given likely low levels of awareness in the wider population. More generally, the variability in participants and breadth of perspectives presented on each subject suggests that this paper is likely to represent the most important issues for the general cat owning population, with the main difference likely to be the strength of feeling for a certain perspective rather than the position itself.

4.4 | Implications for reintroduction initiatives

Cat owners represent a community who may be natural supporters of wildcat conservation. Collaboration between cat owners and cat welfare groups with wildcat conservation projects will be key to the management of both owned and unowned cats. There is a need to address areas where division exists (e.g., concerns over conflict between wildcats and owned cats), as well as identify areas of consensus (e.g., the benefits of neutering for

wildcats and unowned cat welfare) in establishing meaningful collaboration (Dando et al., 2023). This process is not simply about the meeting of goals for conservation and cat welfare, but also working in relation to the diversity of perspectives that exist among cat owners, especially toward unowned cat behavior and management. For a reintroduction to be successful, agreement on and a strategy for managing unowned cats are of fundamental importance. The complex biopolitical space occupied by unowned cats' challenges traditional nature/culture divides, as these animals exist in a liminal state between wild and domestic. Understanding and balancing this in the context of a wildcat reintroduction is a fundamental challenge. This liminality is reflected in the contested views about who has legitimate authority to control these populations and through what means. As we have highlighted, there is no consensus on who is—or should be—responsible for unowned cats. While lethal control was generally considered unacceptable, there is ongoing debate about what other forms of control are appropriate. Unowned cats thus become sites of contested biopolitical power, where stakeholders with diverse aims, including cat owners, charities, and conservationists separately try to define and implement governance over individual and populations of cats. If and how the reintroduction of wildcats shifts the perceptions of this “domestic wildcat” will likely be determined by the role and messaging of conservation groups and any collaboration and consensus building among these stakeholders. This discussion suggests that the liminal place occupied by unowned cats requires that conservationists planning wildcat reintroductions need to bring together a wide range of stakeholders in the approach and implementation of domestic cat management as a key means of realizing their conservation objectives.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

TRD, SLC, and RAM were responsible for the paper's conceptualization and methodology. TRD conducted all data collection, formal analysis, and led the writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the writing and editing of the manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank all the participants who were interviewed as part of this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data for this article were collected by the authors from semi-structured interviews. This data are not publicly

available as, in line with ethical approval and participant consent and confidentiality agreements, it has not been archived in a data repository.

ORCID

Thomas R. Dando  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4503-4197>

Robbie A. McDonald  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6922-3195>

Richard P. Young  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6515-6343>

Stephen P. Carter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9487-7377>

Sarah L. Crowley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4854-0925>

REFERENCES

- Auster, R. E., Barr, S. W., & Brazier, R. E. (2021). Improving engagement in managing reintroduction conflicts: Learning from beaver reintroduction. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 64, 1713–1734.
- Bacon, A. (2017). *Responsible cat ownership attitudes and behaviours in the context of Scottish wildcat (Felis silvestris) conservation*. [Thesis]. University of Edinburgh.
- Baker, S., Maw, S., Johnson, P. J., & Macdonald, D. (2020). Not in my backyard: Public perceptions of wildlife and ‘pest control’ in and around UK homes. *Animals*, 10, 2.
- Bassett, I. E., McNaughton, E. J., Plank, G. D., & Stanley, M. C. (2020). Cat ownership and proximity to significant ecological areas influence attitudes towards cat impacts and management practices. *Environmental Management*, 66, 30–41.
- Bastianelli, M. L., Premier, J., Herrmann, M., Anile, S., Monterroso, P., Kuemmerle, T., Dormann, C. F., Streif, S., Jerosch, S., Götz, M., Simon, O., Moleón, M., Gil-Sánchez, J. M., Biró, Z., Dekker, J., Severon, A., Krannich, A., Hupe, K., Germain, E., ... Heurich, M. (2021). Survival and cause-specific mortality of European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) across Europe. *Biological Conservation*, 261, 109239.
- Biró, Z., Lanszki, J., Szemethy, L., Heltai, M., & Randi, E. (2005). Feeding habits of feral domestic cats (*Felis catus*), wild cats (*Felis silvestris*) and their hybrids: Trophic niche overlap among cat groups in Hungary. *Journal of Zoology*, 266, 187–196.
- Bonacic, C., Almuna, R., & Ibarra, J. T. (2019). Biodiversity conservation requires management of feral domestic animals. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 34(8), 683–686.
- Bradshaw, J. W. S. (2016). Sociality in cats: A comparative review. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 11, 113–124.
- Bradshaw, J. W. S., Horsfield, G. F., Allen, J. A., & Robinson, I. H. (1999). Feral cats: Their role in the population dynamics of *Felis catus*. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 65, 273–283.
- Breitenmoser, U., Lanz, T., & Breitenmoser-Würsten, C. (2019). *Conservation of the wildcat (Felis silvestris) in Scotland: Review of the conservation status and assessment of conservation activities*. IUCN SSC Cat Specialist Group, commissioned by the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan Steering Group. <http://www.scottishwildcataction.org/media/42633/wildcat-in->

- scotland-review-of-conservation-status-and-activities-final-14-february-2019.pdf
- Calver, M. C., Crawford, H. M., & Fleming, P. A. (2020). Response to Wolf et al.: Furthering debate over the suitability of trap-neuter-return for stray cat management. *Animals*, 10, 362. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10020362>
- Campbell, R. D., Rawling, E., Langridge, K. V., & Tallach, N. (2023). *Scottish wildcat action (SWA) specialist report—Trap neuter vaccinate return Programme*. NatureScot. <https://www.nature.scot/doc/scottish-wildcat-action-swa-specialist-report-trap-neuter-vaccinate-return-programme>
- Cecchetti, M., Crowley, S. L., & McDonald, R. A. (2021a). Drivers and facilitators of hunting behaviour in domestic cats and options for management. *Mammal Review*, 51, 307–322.
- Cecchetti, M., Crowley, S. L., Goodwin, C. E. D., & McDonald, R. A. (2021b). Provision of high meat content food and object play reduce predation of wild animals by domestic cats *Felis catus*. *Current Biology*, 31, 1107–1111.e5.
- Crawford, H. M., Calver, M. C., & Fleming, P. A. (2019). A case of letting the cat out of the bag—Why trap-neuter-return is not an ethical solution for stray cat (*Felis catus*) management. *Animals*, 9, 171.
- Crowley, S. L., Cecchetti, M., & McDonald, R. A. (2019). Hunting behaviour in domestic cats: An exploratory study of risk and responsibility among cat owners. *People and Nature*, 1, 18–30.
- Crowley, S. L., Cecchetti, M., & McDonald, R. A. (2020a). Diverse perspectives of cat owners indicate barriers to and opportunities for managing cat predation of wildlife. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 18, 544–549.
- Crowley, S. L., Cecchetti, M., & McDonald, R. A. (2020b). Our wild companions: Domestic cats in the Anthropocene. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 35, 477–483.
- Crowley, S. L., DeGrange, L., Matheson, D., & McDonald, R. A. (2022). Comparing conservation and animal welfare professionals' perspectives on domestic cat management. *Biological Conservation*, 272, 109659.
- Crowley, S. L., Hinchliffe, S., & McDonald, R. A. (2017). Nonhuman citizens on trial: The ecological politics of a beaver reintroduction. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49, 1846–1866.
- Dando, T. R., Crowley, S. L., Young, R. P., Carter, S. P., & McDonald, R. A. (2023). Social feasibility assessments in conservation translocations. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 38, 459–472.
- Daniels, M. J., & Corbett, L. (2003). Redefining introgressed protected mammals: When is a wildcat a wild cat and a dingo a wild dog? *Wildlife Research*, 30, 121–124.
- Daniels, M. J., Golder, M. C., Jarrett, O., & MacDonald, D. W. (1999). Feline viruses in wildcats from Scotland. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases*, 35, 121–124.
- Deak, B. P., Ostendorf, B., Taggart, D. A., Peacock, D. E., & Bardsley, D. K. (2019). The significance of social perceptions in implementing successful feral cat Management strategies: A global review. *Animals*, 9, 617.
- Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Department of the Communities and Local Government, Office for National Statistics, & Welsh Government. (2016). *Rural urban classification (England and Wales)*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/rural-urban-classification>
- Doherty, T. S., Glen, A. S., Nimmo, D. G., Ritchie, E. G., & Dickman, C. R. (2016). Invasive predators and global biodiversity loss. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113, 11261–11265.
- Ferreira, J. P., Leitão, I., Santos-Reis, M., & Revilla, E. (2011). Human-related factors regulate the spatial ecology of domestic cats in sensitive areas for conservation. *PLoS One*, 6, e25970.
- Fredriksen, A. (2016). Of wildcats and wild cats: Troubling species-based conservation in the Anthropocene. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34, 689–705.
- Gates, M., Walker, J., Zito, S., & Dale, A. (2019). A survey of opinions towards dog and cat management policy issues in New Zealand. *New Zealand Veterinary Journal*, 67, 315–322.
- Gerhold, R. W., & Jessup, D. A. (2013). Zoonotic diseases associated with free-roaming cats. *Zoonoses and Public Health*, 60, 189–195.
- Gering, E., Incorvaia, D., Henriksen, R., Wright, D., & Getty, T. (2019). Maladaptation in feral and domesticated animals. *Evolutionary Applications*, 12, 1274–1286.
- Hall, C. M., Adams, N. A., Bradley, J. S., Bryant, K. A., Davis, A. A., Dickman, C. R., Fujita, T., Kobayashi, S., Lepczyk, C. A., McBride, E. A., Pollock, K. H., Styles, I. M., Heezik, Y. v., Wang, F., & Calver, M. C. (2016). Community attitudes and practices of urban residents regarding predation by pet cats on wildlife: An international comparison. *PLoS One*, 11, e0151962.
- Henriksen, R., Gering, E., & Wright, D. (2018). Feralisation—The understudied counterpoint to domestication. *In Origin and evolution of biodiversity* (pp. 183–195).
- Holm, N. (2020). Consider the (feral) cat: Ferality, biopower, and the ethics of predation. *Society & Animals*, 30, 781–797.
- Hostetler, M., Wisely, S. M., Johnson, S., Pienaar, E. F., & Main, M. (2020). How effective and humane is trap-neuter-release (TNR) for feral cats. *EDIS*, 2020, 8.
- Jarić, I., Roll, U., Bonaiuto, M., Brook, B. W., Courchamp, F., Firth, J. A., Gaston, K. J., Heger, T., Jeschke, J. M., Ladle, R. J., Meinard, Y., Roberts, D. L., Sherren, K., Soga, M., Soriano-Redondo, A., Verissimo, D., & Correia, R. A. (2022). Societal extinction of species. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 37, 411–419.
- Kilshaw, K., Macdonald, D. W., & Kitchener, A. (2008). Feral cat management in the Cairngorms; scoping study. *Report to Scottish Natural Heritage*, 22371, 149.
- Klar, N., Fernández, N., Kramer-Schadt, S., Herrmann, M., Trinzen, M., Büttner, I., & Niemitz, C. (2008). Habitat selection models for European wildcat conservation. *Biological Conservation*, 141, 308–319.
- König, H. J., Kiffner, C., Kramer-Schadt, S., Fürst, C., Keuling, O., & Ford, A. T. (2020). Human–wildlife coexistence in a changing world. *Conservation Biology*, 34, 786–794.
- Langley, P. J. W., & Yalden, D. W. (1977). The decline of the rarer carnivores in Great Britain during the nineteenth century. *Mammal Review*, 7, 95–116.
- Lescureux, N., Linnell, J. D. C., Mustafa, S., Melovski, D., Stojanov, A., Ivanov, G., Avukatov, V., Arx, M. v., & Breitenmoser, U. (2011). Fear of the unknown: Local knowledge and perceptions of the Eurasian lynx *Lynx lynx* in western Macedonia. *Oryx*, 45, 600–607.
- Littlewood, N. A., Campbell, R. D., Dinnie, L., Gilbert, L., Hooper, R., Iason, G., Irvine, J., Kilshaw, K., Kitchener, A. C., & Lackova, P.

- (2014). *Survey and scoping of wildcat priority areas* (Report No. 768). Scottish Natural Heritage.
- Loss, S. R., & Marra, P. P. (2017). Population impacts of free-ranging domestic cats on mainland vertebrates. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 15, 502–509.
- Loyd, K. A. T., & Hernandez, S. M. (2012). Public perceptions of domestic cats and preferences for feral cat management in the southeastern United States. *Anthrozoös*, 25, 337–351.
- Lozano, J., Moleón, M., & Virgós, E. (2006). Biogeographical patterns in the diet of the wildcat, *Felis silvestris* Schreber, in Eurasia: Factors affecting the trophic diversity. *Journal of Biogeography*, 33, 1076–1085.
- MacPherson, J., Carter, S., Hudson, M., Devillard, S., Ruetten, S., & Kennerley, R. (2019). *A preliminary feasibility assessment for the reintroduction of the European wildcat to England and Wales*. Vincent Wildlife Trust, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust. <https://www.vwt.org.uk/downloads/a-preliminary-feasibility-assessment-for-the-reintroduction-of-the-european-wildcat-to-england-and-wales/>
- Marino, F., Crowley, S. L., Foley, N. A. W., McDonald, R. A., & Hodgson, D. J. (2024). The transformative potential of local stakeholder engagement in the reintroduction of a contested species. *Biological Conservation*, 296, 110688.
- Mattucci, F., Oliveira, R., Lyons, L. A., Alves, P. C., & Randi, E. (2016). European wildcat populations are subdivided into five main biogeographic groups: Consequences of Pleistocene climate changes or recent anthropogenic fragmentation? *Ecology and Evolution*, 6, 3–22.
- Medina, F. M., Bonnaud, E., Vidal, E., & Nogales, M. (2014). Underlying impacts of invasive cats on islands: Not only a question of predation. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 23, 327–342.
- Natoli, E., Ziegler, N., Dufau, A., & Teixeira, M. P. (2019). Unowned free-roaming domestic cats: Reflection of animal welfare and ethical aspects in animal laws in six European countries. *Journal of Applied Animal Ethics Research*, 2, 38–56.
- Nussberger, B., Barbosa, S., Beaumont, M., Currat, M., Devillard, S., Heurich, M., Howard-McCombe, J., Mattucci, F., Nowak, C., Quilodrán, C. S., Senn, H., Alves, P. C., EUROWILDCAT Consortium, Götz, M., Ferreras, P., Fischer, D., Fischer, L., Frangini, L., Janssen, R., ... Trinzen, M. (2023). A common statement on anthropogenic hybridization of the European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*). *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, 11, 1156387.
- Palmer, A., & Thomas, V. (2023). Categorisation of cats: Managing boundary felids in Aotearoa New Zealand and Britain. *People and Nature*, 5, 1539–1551.
- People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA). (2022). PDSA animal well-being (PAW) report. <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/12965/pdsa-paw-report-2022.pdf>
- People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA). (2017). PDSA animal wellbeing (PAW) report. <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/4371/pdsa-paw-report-2017.pdf>
- Read, J. L., Dickman, C. R., Boardman, W. S. J., & Lepczyk, C. A. (2020). Reply to Wolf et al.: Why trap-neuter-return (TNR) is not an ethical solution for stray cat management. *Animals*, 9, 989.
- Rodríguez-Rodríguez, E. J., Gil-Morión, J., & Negro, J. J. (2022). Feral animal populations: Separating threats from opportunities. *Land*, 11, 1370.
- Ruiz-Villar, H., Bastianelli, M. L., Heurich, M., Anile, S., Díaz-Ruiz, F., Ferreras, P., Götz, M., Herrmann, M., Jerosch, S., Jubete, F., López-Martín, J. M., Monterroso, P., Simon, O., Streif, S., Trinzen, M., Urrea, F., López-Bao, J. V., & Palomares, F. (2023). Agriculture intensity and landscape configuration influence the spatial use of wildcats across Europe. *Biological Conservation*, 277, 109854.
- Scott, J., Kikken, M., Rose, M., & Colyer, P. (2016). Nimbyism and nature: Whose backyard is it anyway? In *Balanced urban development: Options and strategies for liveable cities* (pp. 29–43). Springer.
- Serota, M. W., Barker, K. J., Gigliotti, L. C., Maher, S. M., Shawler, A. L., Zuckerman, G. R., Xu, W., Verta, G., Templin, E., Andreozzi, C. L., & Middleton, A. D. (2023). Incorporating human dimensions is associated with better wildlife translocation outcomes. *Nature Communications*, 14, 2119.
- Smith, B. P., Appleby, R. G., & Jordan, N. R. (2020). Co-existing with dingoes: Challenges and solutions to implementing non-lethal management. *Australian Zoologist*, 3, 491–510.
- Srinivasan, K. (2013). The biopolitics of animal being and welfare: Dog control and care in the UK and India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38, 106–119.
- Taetzsch, S. J., Bertke, A. S., & Gruszynski, K. R. (2018). Zoonotic disease transmission associated with feral cats in a metropolitan area: A geospatial analysis. *Zoonoses and Public Health*, 65, 412–419.
- Tiesmeyer, A., Ramos, L., Manuel Lucas, J., Steyer, K., Alves, P. C., Astaras, C., Brix, M., Cragnolini, M., Domokos, C., Hegyeli, Z., Janssen, R., Kitchener, A. C., Lambinet, C., Mestdagh, X., Migli, D., Monterroso, P., Mulder, J. L., Schockert, V., Youlatos, D., ... Nowak, C. (2020). Range-wide patterns of human-mediated hybridisation in European wildcats. *Conservation Genetics*, 21, 247–260.
- Trouwborst, A., & Somsen, H. (2020). Domestic cats (*Felis catus*) and European nature conservation law—Applying the EU birds and habitats directive to a significant but neglected threat to wildlife. *Journal of Environmental Law*, 32, 391–415.
- Trouwborst, A., McCormack, P. C., & Martínez Camacho, E. (2020). Domestic cats and their impacts on biodiversity: A blind spot in the application of nature conservation law. *People and Nature*, 2, 235–250.
- Unterköfler, M. S., Harl, J., Barogh, B. S., Spargser, J., Hrazdilová, K., Müller, F., Jeschke, D., Anders, O., Steinbach, P., Ansoerge, H., Fuehrer, H.-P., & Heddergott, M. (2022). Molecular analysis of blood-associated pathogens in European wildcats (*Felis silvestris silvestris*) from Germany. *International Journal for Parasitology: Parasites and Wildlife*, 19, 128–137.
- van Eeden, L. M., Hames, F., Faulkner, R., Geschke, A., Squires, Z. E., & McLeod, E. M. (2020). Putting the cat before the wildlife: Exploring cat owners' beliefs about cat containment as predictors of owner behavior. *Conservation Science and Practice*, 10, e502.
- Van Patter, L. E., & Hovorka, A. J. (2018). 'Of place' or 'of people': Exploring the animal spaces and beastly places of feral cats in southern Ontario. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 19, 275–295.
- von Essen, E., & Allen, M. (2020). 'Not the wolf itself': Distinguishing hunters' criticisms of wolves from procedures for making wolf management decisions. *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 23, 97–113.
- Wald, D. M., Jacobson, S. K., & Levy, J. K. (2013). Outdoor cats: Identifying differences between stakeholder beliefs, perceived impacts, risk and management. *Biological Conservation*, 167, 414–424.

- Williams Foley, N. (2022). *Spatial and social dimensions of European wildcat *Felis silvestris* conservation*. University of Exeter. <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/132243>
- Wolf, P. J., Rand, J., Swarbrick, H., Spehar, D. D., & Norris, J. (2019). Reply to Crawford et al.: Why trap-neuter-return (TNR) is an ethical solution for stray cat management. *Animals*, 9, 689.
- Wrigley, C. (2020). Nine lives down: Love, loss, and longing in Scottish wildcat conservation. *Environmental Humanities*, 12, 346–369.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Dando, T. R., McDonald, R. A., Young, R. P., Carter, S. P., & Crowley, S. L. (2025). Cat owners' perceptions of domestic cats and implications for European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) restoration. *Conservation Science and Practice*, e70056. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.70056>